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X Seems to Have Picked Up Where the Doors Left Off

By Michael Goldberg

THE POP SCENE

LOS ANGELES is different from other American cities. All you have to do is spend some time there to find that out. It's not *just* that everything is so spread out, so disconnected—it can take two hours just to drive across town. L.A. is different because it contains Hollywood: both as an actual place, and as a prime icon of the American Dream.

The tension that defines the City of Angels and makes it unique is created by a Grand Canyon-wide gap between the fantasies of fame and the rather tawdry reality of the 24-hour-a-day hustle.

L.A. is mostly a sunbaked wasteland. And in the late 60s, an L.A. based rock band called the Doors and their controversial, larger-than-life singer/songwriter, the late Jim Morrison, captured the L.A. ambience of low-life sleaze, shattered dreams, cheap hotels, teenage hookers, drugged nights and boozey days. The Doors' records were a kind of rock 'n' roll equivalent of Raymond Chandler's murky private eye novels.

JIM MORRISON

"Drivin' down your freeways," sang Morrison about L.A. "Midnight alleys roam/ Cops in cars, topless bars/ Never saw a woman—/ So alone, so alone..." The song, "L.A. Woman," was one of the last that Morrison recorded with the Doors before dying of too much booze and/or drugs (no one knows for sure) in a bathtub in Paris in 1971.

The Doors first album, "The Doors," was a dark, moody work whose songs dealt with drugs ("Break On Through" and "The Crystal Ship"), sex ("Soul Kitchen" and "Twentieth Century Fox"), death ("End of the Night") and all three at once in the Oedipal drama, "The End" ("The killer awoke at dawn and put his boots on.../'Father?'/'Yes son?'/'I want to kill you. Mother...I want to —— you!' ").

Yet despite the Doors' negative imagery and at times X-rated content, the band was instantly a hit. Seven months after their debut album was released, the group had a number one national hit with the extremely sexual, "Light My Fire."

The Doors were referred to as the "American Rolling Stones," when they reigned as the most popular American rock band in the late 60s. Critic Lester Bangs thought they went much further than the Stones. "The Stones were dirty," he wrote in "The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock And Roll," "but the Doors were *dread*..."

Morrison himself was "the first major sex symbol since James Dean died and Marlon Brando got a paunch," as one writer put it, and a "shaman-serpent king," according to another.

In "**No One Here Gets Out Alive**" (Warner Books, New York, 387 pages, $7.95) authors Jerry Hopkins (who wrote the popular biography of Elvis Presley, "Elvis") and Daniel Sugarman (who worked for the Doors) portray Morrison as a wild, impulsive man who dealt with his sudden success by becoming an alcoholic. In this biography of Jim Morrison's life, incident after incident of his self-flagelation as he drank himself into unconsciousness or smashed up his car or danced two stories above the street on the outer ledges of buildings are recounted. "Occasionally, when he got bored, Jim would hang by his hands from a hotel room window," write Hopkins and Sugarman.

Yet paralleling Morrison's self-destructive personality was a sensitive intellectual side. The singer had attended UCLA before putting togther the Doors and had written poetry since grade school. Morrison had read Nietzsche ("The Birth of Tragedy" inspired "The End"), Sartre, Camus, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Dylan Thomas...the list went on and on. Morrison was very serious about his own poetry and didn't want it associated with his rock and roll career. When Simon and Schuster published his book of poetry, "The Lords and the New Creatures," Morrison was upset that they had mentioned that he was a rock singer on the book's jacket—expressly against his wishes.

Following the Doors success in mid-1967, Morrison apparently had only brief flashes of creativity. An interesting fact that emerges in the book is that many of the lyrics to the songs that appeared on the group's seven albums of original material were based on poems Morrison had written *prior* to the group's formation. He spent most of his time drunk, carrying on stormy affairs with numerous women.

"No One Here Gets Out Alive" is not particularly well written—nor is the author's perspective properly distanced. "My personal belief is that Jim Morrison was a God," writes Sugarman in the forward. Still, as a trashy, easy-to-read rock 'n' roll book packed with interesting facts and anecdotes about Morrison and the Doors, this book is a winner. And for anyone who wants to get some insight into the key figure in one of the pivotal rock bands of the 60s—and *the* significant 60s rock band to emerge from L.A.—this is a must read.

Nearly ten years after Morrison's death, a dark, ugly L.A. band known only as X seems to have picked up where the Doors left off. X's brilliant debut album, "**Los Angeles**" (Slash Records) is a gloomy, despairing piece of rock 'n' roll, as lyrically offensive today as the Doors' song, "The End" was in 1967.

Wrote critic Richard Meltzer in the Village Voice recently, "X might just *BE* THE DOORS..." Certainly the fact that Doors' keyboard player Ray Manzarek produced the LP and played organ on several tracks, and that X included a version of the Doors' song, "Soul Kitchen" doesn't hurt. But it's the deadly hard punk rock (akin to the compelling noise of the first Clash and Sex Pistols albums) and the violent, distinctly unsentimental imagery that makes this band matter like no L.A. band has mattered in years. They matter because they're real L.A. kids singing about real L.A. life. And they capture everything that is awful about the southland metropolis on this album.

In "The Unheard Music," X vocalists Exene and John Doe chant like survivors of the People's Temple massacre, "A thousand kids bury their parents/There's laughing outside/ We're locked out of the public eye/ Some smooth chords/ On the car radio/ No hard chords on the car radio/ We set the trash on fire.../We're locked out of the public eye."

Other songs like "Sex and Dying in High Society," "Nausea," and "The World's a Mess; It's In My Kiss," describe a pointless and hypocritical world.

Like the Doors did in the late 60s, X dares to explore ugly questions about existence seldom covered in rock songs. Unlike the Doors, they will probably not become a Top 40 hit band. Their songs are too angry; their lyrics too raw and explicit. But already their album (pressed on the small, independent Slash label) has sold over 20,000 copies and will probably emerge as one of the top 10 albums of the year. (Rolling Stone, the L.A. Times, the Village Voice and others have offered glowing praise.)

X could probably care less. As they sing in "The World's a Mess; It's In My Kiss," "Go to hell—see if you like it." Now that's a message Jim Morrison would certainly have appreciated.

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THE JAZZ SCENE

Concord Festival

SINGER Ernestine Anderson and guitarist Herb Ellis will be among the musicians performing Saturday at the Concord Jazz Festival, being held at the Concord Pavilion.

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